



JOHNSONIAN NEWS LETTER

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Dr. Johnson as a Writer

One of the 19th century ghosts most difficult to lay is the attitude that Johnson's writings are negligible for us today, and that only his conversation is worth remembering. In three works which we have read recently this persistent and popular point of view appears prominently. For example, in *Boswell in Chicago* (a gathering by the Boswell Club of comments by various authors), under the caption "Did Boswell Make Johnson Great?" is the statement that Johnson "was not a great writer or a great thinker, and he has left nothing behind him to explain his unparalleled renown as a dictator of letters. Nothing, that is, but his conversations...." It was Boswell who "made a disgruntled, tired and rather tiresome old hack immortal." And then there is D. B. Wyndham Lewis who asks in *The Hooded Hawk*: "How many of Boswell's devoutest readers today ever open the *Idler*, the *Rambler*, the *Lives of the Poets*, *Rasselas*, or any other volume of the Doctor's once-conquering prose?" Johnson, he continues, "lives today only by his disciple's brilliance."

Finally there is J. H. McNulty's little essay, "Attack and Defense," in the latest issue of the *New Rambler*, the news letter of the Johnson Society of London. Here is described a meeting of the Dilettanti Club, held on the anniversary of Johnson's birth, when an iconoclastic member vigorously attacks all of the great man's works — "not one piece of first class merit, next to nothing of even second rate value." The *Dictionary*, he insists, is "remembered only by its curious definitions"; *Rasselas* read by devotees "but even they cannot pretend they enjoy the story"; the essays rarely rising "above the level of a decent mediocrity"; the poems "not indeed very fit to survive"; and the *Lives of the Poets*, "one of the curiosities of Literature"

filled with perverse criticism. When the vituperative critic is through, the Chairman attempts a defense — timid, halting, and inconclusive. Never grappling with the main contentions of the critic, the Chairman instead stresses the "colossal task" of the *Dictionary* and the fact that Johnson had many great friends who admired him. Superiority is thus only to be proved by the quality of his friendships. It is as if the defender sadly has to admit the chief allegations, and finds it necessary to divert the attack into other channels. Indeed, the implications of the so-called defense are much more damaging than the open frontal assault.

This last has proved too much for your long-suffering editor. Ready to burst, he can restrain himself no longer, and cannot resist giving something of what he believes the Chairman of the Dilettanti Club ought to have answered.

Of course, one man's testament of faith will mean but little. But when an increasing number of competent critics begin to say much the same thing, then a definite pattern can be perceived which is important. And certainly during the past few years there has appeared a new attitude toward Johnson's writings (All aided by the indefatigable work of such men as Nichol Smith, Chapman, Powell, Hazen, McAdam, and Gove in establishing the canon; and by the influence of Raleigh, Tinker, S. C. Roberts, Osgood and others on the new generation of Johnsonians). Right at the start it must be stressed that the new emphasis implies no depreciation of Boswell; indeed, parallel with it runs an increased interest in Boswell the man and a delight in his art as a biographer. And rightly so, for any increase in respect for Johnson's works only tends to prove Boswell's own judgments more valid. The present approach basically stems from an increasing distrust of absolute Romantic judgments in literature, and from a desire to re-examine works of the 18th century in the light of our own 20th century standards. When we do this, Johnson emerges as a more complex and interesting author than the 19th century ever suspected.

Significantly, it is Johnson's poetry which has undergone the most surprising upturn. To be sure, the claim of T. S. Eliot that Johnson's imitations of Juvenal are "among the greatest verse Satires of the English or any other language" would appear to most of us to be excessive. But other critics go almost as far — witness W. C. Brown, who in a current article calls *The Vanity of Human Wishes* "one of the great poems of the language"; and a

a reviewer in the *Spectator* for 14 Nov. 1941, who insists that "Johnson is by no means to be disposed of as a minor poet inferior to Dryden or even to Goldsmith." D. Nichol Smith in a number of places has stressed the superb quality, if restricted range, of the verses. "Nowhere else in all our poetry," he adds, "is the theme that 'all is Vanity' given so majestic expression." And Alfred Noyes in his *Pageant of Letters* points again to the moving emotional quality of Johnson's couplets. "I know of none in the language which, if read with simple integrity of spirit which is their due, are so likely to fill the reader's eyes with unexpected tears."

There is no space here to list the many technical treatises on lexicography which bear tribute to Johnson's skill in defining the English language, but modern dictionary makers are not averse to confessing their debt. In a recent newspaper interview the compiler of a new college dictionary, C. E. Funk, admitted "scurrying back" to Johnson for many definitions. "We still have recourse to the old boy," he said, "but, of course, do not repeat his definition of 'oats.'"

Rasselas, that touchstone with which to determine a true Johnsonian (as Nichol Smith has often insisted), is every year gaining new admirers. There is no need to list all the published testimonies, but if a personal tribute may be permitted, your editor confesses that he reads and re-reads the little volume with increasing interest and delight. Yes "delight"! for the simple tale of the travellers' search for happiness in our real world is ever fresh and stimulating.

The result of recent unbiased examination of Johnson's political and religious convictions shows that he was not the simple bigoted Tory which many have assumed. Bronson, Krutch, and Stuart G. Brown (the latter in a series of very valuable articles in *Neophilologus*, *English Studies*, etc.) have clearly shown the complexity of his thought, and we begin to appreciate Johnson not as an orthodox, prejudiced reactionary, but as a perplexed transitional figure.

We ourselves must shamefacedly confess to less enthusiasm for the periodical essays than is evinced by many of our colleagues, for we suspect that the *Rambler* will never have the appeal to 20th century readers that the superb Soame Jenyns review, the tales, and the biographies will continue to have. But even here the work of Wimsatt and others has cleared away many misconcep-

tions concerning the pomposity of Johnson's literary style. And certainly in the essays there are flashes of the same kind of wit which pleases us so much in his talk.

Finally, it is Johnson's criticism which in the coming years will probably have the most pronounced revival. The great Romantic writers naturally detested his critical approach. In *Books and Characters* Lytton Strachey wittily states this accepted opinion, when he insists that Johnson's aesthetic judgments have every "quality to recommend them except one: they are never right." Johnson has "managed to be wrong so cleverly, that nobody minds." In other words, nobody takes Johnson seriously as a critic. But recently more and more people are studying Johnson seriously, with increasing admiration. We have only to cite Joseph Wood Krutch's analyses, the discussions by Nichol Smith, F. A. Pottle, W. J. Bate, S. G. Brown, M. H. Abrams, to name only a few, to show what is going on. As our own "frame of reference" more closely approximates that of the 18th century, our understanding of Johnson's critical point of view becomes more sympathetic.

Look, for example, at the article by F. R. Leavis in *Scrutiny* for Summer, 1944. Johnson's criticism is "living literature," Leavis begins, "alive and life-giving." Despite certain real limitations, "Johnson is a better critic of eighteenth-century poetry than Matthew Arnold." Even the controversial disapproval of Gray's Pindarics and the attacks on the popular Miltonic imitations of the day are defended by Leavis. "Now that we no longer search the eighteenth century for what is congenial to Victorian-romantic taste — for poetry from the 'soul'" we can appreciate Johnson's annoyance at "the weakness of taste in his age." Indeed, according to Leavis, the treatment of Gray, "who has not even yet fully emerged from the Arnoldian transfiguration," actually illustrates Johnson's "excellence as a critic of eighteenth-century verse." And the *Life of Cowley* is perhaps the "most striking demonstration of his uninhibited versatility."

After this, whatever you may think of the arguments, can there be any doubt that the rehabilitation of Johnson the writer is in full swing? To repeat the old clichés that he is remembered only because of his conversation, or because of his powerful personality, is merely to show that one is behind the times.

Augustan Reprint Society

We are very happy to report that the Augustan Reprint Society is rapidly growing in membership, vigor, and enterprise. The Society is now planning for next fall a Supplement made up entirely of pictures, to be distributed free to subscribers. So if you wish to be sure of receiving this valuable addition to your library, check up to see that you are on the mailing list (Address R. C. Boys (Mich.) or E. N. Hooker (UCLA)).

Next year's program promises to be attractive.

May, 1947: John Gay's *Present State of Wit*, etc. Introduction by Donald Bond.

July, 1947: Creech's translation of Rapin's *De Carmine Pastoralis*. Introduction by J. E. Cogington.

Sept., 1947: T. Hamner's (?) *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet*. Introduction by C. D. Thorpe.

Nov., 1947: Corbyn Morris's *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit*, etc. Introduction by J. L. Clifford.

Jan., 1948: T. Burney's *Discourse on the Pastoral*. Introduction by Earl Wasserman.

Mar., 1948: Essays on the 'Stage', selected, with Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch.

Some New Johnsoniana

Through the generous aid of Mary Alden Hopkins, and with the kind permission of Cuthbert B. Pigot (Wood Rising, Boxford, Suffolk), we have received a number of hitherto unprinted references to Johnson, which we plan to include in future issues of the *JNL*. Next time, for example, there will be some comments on Johnson's last days, contained in a letter from William Weller Pepys to Hannah More in Dec., 1784. This time we merely pass on two anecdotes from a note book kept by the Misses Roberts, great-aunts of the present owner, on a visit to Hannah More about 1830.

"In speaking of Johnson's peculiarities of manner, she described his way of asking to be helped to any dish at Table; he would often say with solemnity of voice, 'I will lug as much of that pudding as is consistent with the wants of others' — And when he had partaken of a more elegant table than usual, he

would say in a tone of gravity mixed with satisfaction 'I have dined liberally today.'

.....

Mrs. H. More was repeating Dr. Johnson's eulogium upon glass which he said was the most elegant of all inventions, & which the Romans wanted amidst all their luxury and splendour - & 'as a consummation of its valuable qualities it has been made the blessed means (added he) of furnishing *subsidiary light* '!"

News from England

The January 1947 *The New Rambler* has arrived, filled as usual with interesting news and comments. The 17th annual report of the Johnson Society of London, also sent on by A. Lloyd-Jones the Hon. Treasurer, indicates that there has continued to be a high average of attendance at the meetings. Because of health, O. D. Savage has been forced to resign as Hon. Secretary.

Geoffrey Tillotson is at work on a revision of his book on Pope, which has been out of print for some time.

A recent publication is C. C. Abbott's *Boswell*, the Robert Spence Memorial Lecture delivered at Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1945.

On 23 May the Cambridge Press will publish a new edition of the diary of Dr. Thomas Campbell, the Irish clergyman who came to London in 1775 and became intimate with Johnson, Boswell and their circle. It is now edited from the original manuscript in Sydney, New South Wales, with a biographical sketch by J. L. Clifford, and an Introduction by S. C. Roberts.

S. C. Roberts (Cambridge Univ. Press) has just completed a number of articles on Johnson, Boswell, Fielding, Richardson, etc., for the new *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*.

Miscellaneous News Items

We are delighted to hear from Milton French that the *Seventeenth-Century News-Letter* will soon be on its feet again. The editorship is to be assumed by Stanley Johnson of U.C.L.A. All best wishes for a successful career for our sister publication!!

Sarah Chokla Gross asks that we pass on information concerning the *Broadside* of the Theatre Library Assn. If any of our subscribers is a collector or researcher in the field of the theatre and would like to see a sample copy, she will gladly send him one. Address Mrs. Gross at 11 Newkirk Ave., East Rockaway, L.I., N.Y.

Longmans Green, publishers, plans to bring out in this country D. B. Wyndham Lewis's new book about Boswell, *The Hooded Hawk*. Alas! we wish we could recommend it honestly, for it is written in an entertaining style, but Lewis is much too casual about facts, and is so violently prejudiced in many ways that his biography must be read with great caution.

Robert Halsband's monograph edition of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's periodical, *The Nonsense of Common-Sense* (1737-38) is to be published in the Northwestern Univ. Studies.

Among the recent Guggenheim fellowship awards are: David V. Erdman, "A study of social change in England, 1789-1806"; W. H. Rubsamen (UCLA), "A study of the music of the 18th century ballad operas"; E. L. McAdam, Jr. (NYU), "Samuel Johnson and the Law"; William Haller (Columbia), "Thought and expression in the Puritan Revolution"; G. B. Evans (Wis.), "A first-line index to manuscript miscellanies or commonplace books of English verse from 1550-1700, contained in the principal libraries and private collections in the U.S."; Richard Alewyn (Queens) "A study of the changing concepts of the arts and the artist — 1750-1850."

W. Powell Jones is now Dean of Adelbert College, Western Reserve Univ., Cleveland.

Work in Progress

Note: At the suggestion of R. D. Havens, some of the items here listed are taken from *A Survey of Humanistic Work in Progress on the Pacific Coast, 1945-1946*, issued by the American Council of Learned Societies, Bulletin No. 39, November, 1946.

General

BAILEY, Margery (Stanford). *Subject Index to English Novels, 1700-1820*.

BURNETT, Gail (UCLA). *Cicero and the English Deists*. D. (UCLA).

DeBRUYN, John R. (Brothers). *The Influence of the Character Types of Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century Comedy upon the Characters of Fielding's Novels*. D. (Princeton).

GALBRAITH, Lois A. (Kensington High School for Girls, Philadelphia, Pa.). *The Anglican Clergy as Depicted in the Eighteenth Century Novel*. D. (Pennsylvania).

JONES, Ernest (UCLA). *Eighteenth Century English Plays on Pre-Norman Conquest History*.

JOOST, Jr., Nicholas T. (North Carolina). *A Study of the Free-Thinker, 1718-1721*. D. (North Carolina).

McKENZIE, Gordon (Calif.). *The Psychological Current in Later Eighteenth Century Criticism*. Six chapters written.

MATTHEWS, Wm. (UCLA). *Linguistic-Literary Relationships in England in the Neo-Classical Period*. Material partly gathered.

MORGAN, B. Q. (Stanford). *German Literature in British Magazines, 1750-1860*. Three-fourths completed.

PRICE, Lawrence M. (Calif.). *The Publication of English humaniora in Germany in the Eighteenth Century*. Book. Completed.

——— *George Barnwell Album*. Monograph. Material collected.

ROGERSON, Brewster (Calif.). *The Language of the Passions: A Study of Neo-Classic Aesthetics*. Book. Half completed.

SCHORER, Mark (Calif.). *Ideas and Forms in Eighteenth Century Literature*.

Churchill, Charles

WALDHORN, Arthur (CCNY). *A Critical Biography of Charles Churchill*. D. (New York University).

Fielding, Henry

BLANCHARD, F. T. (UCLA). *Fielding: the Making of a Novelist*. Material being collected.

Griffith, Elizabeth

ESHLEMAN, Dorothy (Box 1997, University, Alabama). *A Study of Elizabeth Griffith*. D. (Pennsylvania).

Johnson, Samuel

HENDERSON, Sara (North Carolina). *Dr. Johnson's Spenser Criticism and His Use of Spenser in the Dictionary*.

Oldmixon, John

JONES, Ernest (UCLA). *John Oldmixon's Attack on Clarendon and Echard in His Critical History of England*.

Priestly, Joseph

PARKE, M. C. (610 East 14th, Chester, Pa.). *Joseph Priestley and the Pantisocratists*. D. (Pennsylvania).

Prior, Matthew

EWING, Majl (UCLA). *Concordance to the Works of Matthew Prior*.

Rowe, Nicholas

HESSE, A. W. (3418 S. 8th, Arlington, Va.). *Nicholas Rowe's Translation of Lucan's Pharsalia*. D. (Pennsylvania).

Voltaire

STRUBLE, Mildred (USC). *The Scope of Voltaire's Interests as Revealed in His Correspondence.*

Welsted, Leonard

FINEMAN, Daniel A. (3433 Woodland Avenue, Philadelphia). *A Study of Leonard Welsted, D. (Pennsylvania).*

Young, Edward

BAILEY, Margery (Stanford). *Concordance to the Works of Edward Young.*

Queries

Bertrand Bronson (Calif.) would like to know what our readers think of the following suggestion: "The name Blifil has excited a good deal of curiosity among the readers of Fielding, both as to its significance and as to its pronunciation. My notion is that it may be a derivative of the old adverb *belive*. As alternative spellings, the *OED* gives *blive* (4-7), *blif*, *blyf* (5), *belyfe* (5-8). It is still in use in Scotland. *OED* quotes Burns' *Cotter's Saturday Night*: 'Belyve, the elder bairns come drapping in.' The second syllable carries its own explanation, and the whole name would thus signify 'quick to evil,' or 'eagerly wrong,' 'eager in doing and thinking ill.' The pronunciation would then probably be blæi-, and the f tends to be voiced between the two vowels. (Note the contrast with Allworthy.)"

Nicholas T. Joost, Jr. (Box 465, Chapel Hill, N. C.) writes: "If you can give me any references to the contributors to the *Free-Thinker* (1718-21), I should appreciate your doing so. I am especially interested in the following men: Sir Thomas Burnet, Mr. Conrade De Gols, George Ducket, the Rev. Mr. Henry Stephens, and the Rev. Mr. George Stubbs."

Answers to Queries

The request of C. R. Tracy for information concerning Hall's Chocolate House, etc., in our last issue has brought a number of replies. George Healey (Cornell) writes that there were two houses of this name during the reign of Queen Anne. "One was in Bell Savage Yard, Ludgate Hill; the other in Great Wild Street, near Lincoln's Inn. See John Ashton, *Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne* (1882), II, 264.

W. Van Lennep (Harvard) and Mary E. Knapp (Hamden, Conn.) explain that the play in which Thomas Keene appeared as Dioclesian was *The Prophetess* by Fletcher, revised by Betterton. It was revived by Rich at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields on 3 Dec. 1715 (as "not acted 16 years"), and repeated on 28 Jan. 1716, 9 Dec. 1716, 11 April 1717.

Recent Articles

Those who enjoyed Samuel Monk's paper in Group VII at the last M.L.A. meeting may find an extended version "Dryden Studies: A Survey - 1920-1945" in *ELH* for March, 1947.

Appearing in periodicals which you may not ordinarily see are articles by Oscar Sherwin (CCNY): "John Howard and His Famous Book," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, January, 1945; "Crime and Punishment in England of the Eighteenth Century," *AJES*, January, 1946; and "An Eighteenth Century Beveridge Planner," *American Historical Review*, January, 1947.

Those interested in the earlier part of our period will want to read Helen W. Randall's "The Rise and Fall of a Martyrology: Sermons on Charles I," appearing in the *Huntington Library Quarterly*, February, 1947. Also Colin JI Horne's "The Phalaris Controversy: King versus Bentley," *RES*, October, 1946; J. H. Neumann's "Eighteenth-Century Linguistic Tastes as Exhibited in Sheridan's Edition of Swift," *American Speech*, December, 1946; Irvin Ehrenpreis' "Swift and Mr. John Temple," *MLN*, March, 1947; Monroe K. Spears' (Vanderbilt), "The Meaning of Matthew Prior's 'Alma,'" *ELH*, Dec. 1946. (In contradiction to Johnson, Spears insists the poem did have a design and special meaning for contemporary readers.)

Space forbids more than mention of other articles we should like to comment on: A O. Aldridge's "Akenside and the Hierarchy of Beauty," *MLQ*, March, 1947; Oskar Seidlin's "Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Thomas Mann's *Joseph the Provider*," *MLQ*, March, 1947; Charles B. Woods' "Fielding and the Authorship of *Shamela*," *PQ*, July, 1946; J. H. Neumann's "Chesterfield and the Standard of Usage in English," *MLQ*, December, 1946; Wallace Cable Brown's "Johnson as Poet," *MLQ*, March, 1947; T. C. Fan's "Sir William Jones's Chinese Studies," *RES*, October, 1946; and W. S. Lewis's "Collector's Progress," *Atlantic*, April, 1947.

An interesting address which you may have missed, and which we

only recently saw ourselves, is R. P. McCutcheon's "Johnson and Boswell Today," *Three Addresses*, Tulane Univ., New Orleans, 1944.

An American Comment on Johnson

Buchanan Charles (Cambridge, Mass.) has sent in a number of interesting references to Johnson, gleaned in a reading of the old *New-York Mirror*. We plan in future issues to pass them on to you. For example, there is the comment in the issue of 18 June 1836, in an unsigned column:

"DR. JOHNSON. — There has been an impression that Johnson's writings have had their day; and the 'Rambler' is cited as a work which has been much admired, and is now but little read. It is partly owing to Johnson himself that his morality is neglected; for his original and striking maxims impressed the public mind so forcibly shortly after they appeared, that they became incorporated with the common sense of mankind, and thus by lifting man to the height where he himself stood, he rendered his own observations unnecessary."

Noah Webster on Johnson

Finley Foster (Western Reserve) comments: "In Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, first edition 1828, I find the following on Sam Johnson:

SECOND, a.

2. Next in value, power, excellence, dignity or rank; inferior. The silks of China are *second* to none in quality. Lord Chatham was *second* to none in eloquence. Dr. Johnson was *second* to none in intellectual powers, but *second* to many in research and erudition.

There you have Noah's considered opinion of his predecessor in the field of lexicography. Incidentally his definition of *lexicographer* is just a straightforward one; he did not carry over Johnson's little joke."

Postscript

There will be comments in the next number on Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*, Lewis' *The Hooded Hawk*, Payne's *Mr. Review*, and books by Frye and Foerster, etc. Also an interesting discovery sent in by Fritz Liebert (Yale).

